CAPTAIN GEORGE'S

Penny Dreadful

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1933: THE OTHER REPUBLIC--See page 4

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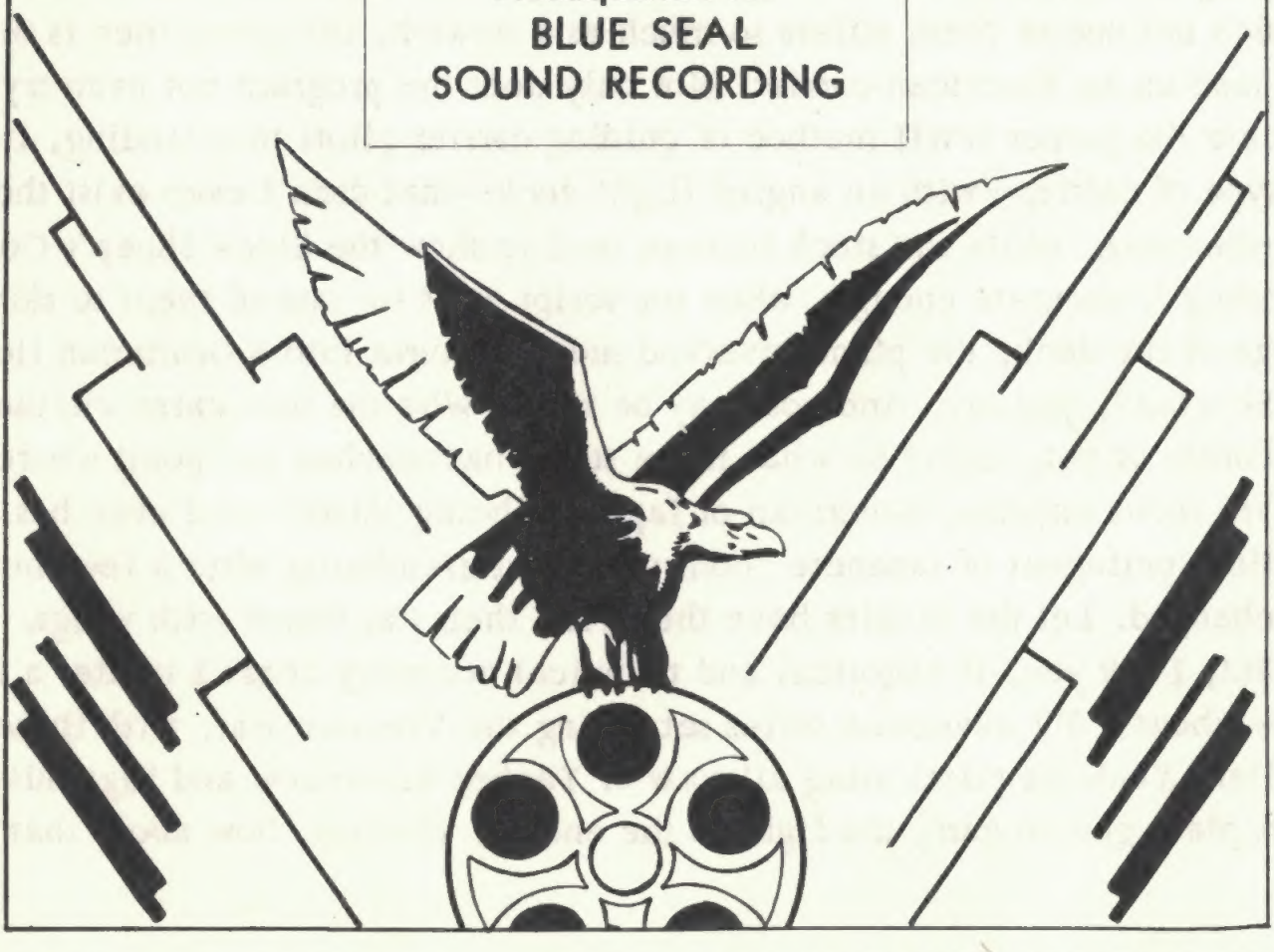

THE LEADING INDEPENDENT STUDIO

A WEEKLY REVIEW

GUEST COLUMN

BY BRICK WALZ

Against my better judgment, I've been watching, off and on, Baa Baa Black Sheep, the NBC series starring Robert Conrad as WWII air ace Greg "Pappy" Boyington, since it came on the air in September claiming to be firmly rooted in fact. In the episodes I've watched since, it has become increasingly evident that the series is, instead, firmly mired in bullshit. I won't go into the usual song and dance about how such a series does a disservice to the men who fought and, in many cases, died during the Pacific campaign; Boyington himself, who was there and spent several years in a Japanese prison camp, is on the series as "adviser" and obviously is adhering to the old policy: "Take the money and run."

To its credit, the series has a handful of well-preserved Corsair fighters, the sight of which is guaranteed to turn an aviation buff to jelly, but nonetheless, Baa Baa Black Sheep is irksome on a number of counts, not the least of which is glaringly mismatched stock footage. In this week's episode, Greg and the boys go on an apparently suicidal mission to bomb a Japanese ship at precisely the right time to bottle up the Jap fleet. Never mind that they go through a lot of plot padding involving deadstick landings on a Japanese-held island; when the attack comes, on a Japanese freighter, mind you, we are suddenly confronted with a dazzling array of sundry vessels, including an aircraft carrier, having the bejeezus blown out of them. After the supposed suicide mission, in which not one of them suffers so much as a scratch, the group then is supposed to land on an American carrier. Not only does the program not even try to recreate the proper WWII method of guiding carrier pilots to a landing, it shows a type of carrier--with an angled flight deck--that didn't even exist then. Furthermore, while the stock footage used to show the Black Sheep's Corsairs landing is accurate enough, when the script calls for one of them to skid to the edge of the deck, the plane involved suddenly turns into a Grumman Hellcat.

So what?, you say. And you may be right. Who the hell cares whether it's accurate or not, right? So what if the series has reached the point where it never shows anyone--American or Japanese being killed--and even has an entire contingent of Japanese "commandos" surrendering after a few shots are exchanged. Let the kiddies have their fun, their Rat Patrol with wings.

But, I ask you, if historical and technical accuracy doesn't matter a damn, how about a TV adventure series set during the Vietnam war, with these gallant Yank jet pilots using all sorts of Yankee know-how and ingenuity and just plain guts to carry the fight to the enemy. Hmmm, how about that?

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DON HUTCHISON

Quick now. What major star of the 1940s is most ignored today?

The one who springs to my mind is Alan Ladd. Books on "The Films of..." are practically a glut on the market but poor Alan Ladd has yet to receive the honor.

It's true that Ladd made few really outstanding movies and perhaps only one classic, but in his prime he was immensely popular and most of the modest features in which he starred made inordinate amounts of money--so much so that one Paramount executive once stated that any time the studio needed to make money they simply turned out a new Alan Ladd movie.

In retrospect Ladd comes off as a rather limited actor with a calculatedly cool manner, but in 1942 he impressed most of us with his performance as Raven in THIS GUN FOR HIRE. I saw that movie as a youngster and after that I stuck with Ladd all through the 40s, through such films as THE GLASS KEY, LUCKY JORDAN, CHINA, THE BLUE DAHLIA, O.S.S., CALCUTTA and WHISPERING SMITH--none of them classics but all good, serviceable films which helped support Ladd's tough guy image.

Personally, I don't know why a book on the films of Alan Ladd would not be successful. Despite his "overnight" success in the film based on Graham Greene's novel, the actor's career in Hollywood dated back to the early 1930s and he was a star in his own right in close to fifty movies. As a young man Ladd worked as a grip at Warner Brothers and first appeared before the cameras as early as 1933. He was an extra in PIGSKIN PARADE (20th Century-Fox 1936), played unbilled parts in THE LAST TRAIN FROM MADRID (Paramount 1937), THE HOWARDS OF VIRGINIA (Columbia 1941) and CITIZEN KANE (RKO 1941). (Okay, who spotted Alan Ladd in Citizen Kane?) Even before his first big break he worked his way up in such films as CAPTAIN CAUTION, IN OLD MISSOURI, LIGHT OF WESTERN STARS and THE BLACK CAT. It was THIS GUN FOR HIRE which made him a star, however, and SHANE which immortalized him.

Despite his earlier popularity it is no secret that Ladd's last films were box-office failures and when he died in 1964 at the age of 50 most newspapers did little more than mark his passing. Why was Ladd's popularity so ephemeral? Pete Harris may have found the answer in the writings of Raymond Chandler who once wrote: "Ladd is hard, bitter and occasionally charming, but he is after all a small boy's idea of a tough guy. Bogart is the genuine article..."

Even if for that reason alone, I'd still like to add "The Films of Alan Ladd" to my library of screen history. The only catch is that someone has to publish it first.

* * *

Last week I wrote that Boris Dolgove (sic) was painting the Doc Savage covers for Bantam. Let me be the first to correct my own slip of the ~~brain~~ typewriter; Boris Vallejo is doing the covers as well as those on many other fantasy-related books. Sorry about that, Boris.

PETE HARRIS

THE OTHER REPUBLIC: As any adherent of Republic Pictures knows, that particular studio came into being in 1935 as the result of a corporate shuffle involving, principally, Monogram Pictures and thereafter turned out the serials and B-Westerns we have grown to love over the years, symbolized eventually by the Republic eagle. But, during some research deep into the Vast Whizz-bang Organization archives, I made a startling discovery--there was another Republic as early as 1933 with, judging by the ad reproduced on our cover, an eagle as its trademark.

The difference was, apparently, that our Republic, the Republic of Fighting Devil Dogs, Spy Smasher, The Three Mesquiteers etc, produced its own films, while the 1933-model Republic was in the business of renting out studio space, technical facilities and staff for independent producers including (as nearly as I can determine) Hollywood Pictures, Allied Pictures, Chesterfield, Artclass, Audible, and Majestic.

Republic Studios Inc. had previously operated as Tec Art Studios Inc., a company dating back at least to the early 1920s. After its one-year sojourn under the Republic banner, the company emerged in 1934 as Prudential Studios, same address, but with Harry Sherman as the chief executive instead of Alfred T. Mannon who had been connected with Tec Art well back into the 20s. The following year, Prudential was at a different address, 650 N. Bronson; Sherman was still the head honcho, but had also established Harry Sherman Productions at the same address to start turning out the Hopalong Cassidy series with William Boyd. But that's another story.

Anyway, I think it's interesting that there was, if only for a year, another Republic. An interesting sidelight: The art director at Republic Studios in '33 was listed as Mack D'Agostino; the same name crops up as unit manager on Republic Pictures' serials No. 9 through 30--The Lone Ranger through Secret Service In Darkest Africa--plus Republic serials No. 32 and 33--Captain America and Tiger Woman.

* * *

MORE ON REPUBLIC: I recently mentioned a new compilation movie called Meanwhile, Back At The Ranch featuring film clips of such people as Buck Jones, Gene Autry, Ken Maynard, John Wayne and many more and quoted the punch line appearing in the ad for the feature in Variety: "Principal photography completed...July 1947." Now, in the Nov. 10 Variety, there's a story quoting producer Patrick Curtis as saying much of the material he's using is in public domain. He claims "all of Republic's oaters pre-1947 were not copyrighted, apparently because it was felt 'they weren't worth anything' at the time. Other studios did selective copyrighting, as per Columbia with its Durango Kid series." Curtis goes on to say: "The stuff that is not public domain we're dealing on. Gene Autry owns all of his own films--people like that who have control over their destiny realize what we've been trying to do."